

# The Black Country Education Insight Report 2020

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## Professor Geoff Layer

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The University of Wolverhampton's Education Observatory has provided a much needed overview of the Education landscape in the Black Country. This report provides us with a coherent understanding of education from the early years to post-compulsory adult learning. We are confident that it will help all sectors to not only better understand the local challenges but to also maximise the current and future opportunities in this area. The University of Wolverhampton is the 'University of Opportunity', working with our partners in the region to further economic prosperity and social mobility. It is essential that organisations from different sectors work together to address current and future education and skills needs and we look forward to continue working collaboratively to deliver a vibrant economic future for Black Country residents.



## Professor Nazira Karodia

*Pro Vice-Chancellor for Regional  
Engagement*

The University of Wolverhampton is, besides being a global teaching and research institution, committed to local education and social improvements. This is important because we have immense local talent and potential which need our support. The Black Country is affected by the social and economic strains of moment and history; against that we offer hope, opportunity and training. We are a Civic University addressing and engaging with local educational provision, work and social improvement. This survey and insight into the local education landscape grants us the knowledge and basis for our focus on local education imperatives.



# Introduction

## Michael Jopling

This is the second annual report which examines education and its associated challenges and issues in all phases of education in the Black Country. In the first report in 2019 we focused primarily on analysis of publicly available data, combined with research findings where appropriate, to exemplify various phases and areas of education and employment in the Black Country. We were explicit about our recognition of the limitations of this approach and the deleterious effects that an over-emphasis on measurement and competition have had on schools and colleges in particular. In 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown hit as we were beginning to pull the report together and made this recognition even clearer. The Black Country is characterised by areas with high levels of disadvantage and poverty and it was reported in June 2020 that three of the Black Country local authority areas (Wolverhampton, Walsall and Sandwell) had the highest proportion of COVID-19 cases in the West Midlands. Therefore, we have devoted much of this report to considerations of the impact of the pandemic so far on all the areas of education we explore, drawing as much as possible on the reflections of practitioners and professionals (gathered through online surveys, conversations and interviews), and speculations about what lessons we can learn for the future.

The Education Observatory was created at the University of Wolverhampton in 2017 to undertake and oversee research in all areas of education and allied areas of social policy to secure social justice and regional transformation in the West Midlands. This report takes a broad, holistic approach, moving from early years through compulsory and post-compulsory education, as well as addressing key issues such as special educational needs and disability, ethnicity, employment and skills, and post-digital futures. The intention is to highlight how

disparities at each phase of a Black Country resident's experiences of education influences the next as they move through childhood into adulthood. It is our hope that continuing to focus on education, skills and employment in the Black Country in detail, bringing together data that identifies issues and the effects of the current pandemic, will be useful in helping bring about positive change once we reach what has widely been called "the new normal" post-pandemic.

We have attempted to broaden the scope of this report in 2020 in response to the event we held in 2019 to share the findings of the 2019 report. Like that report, it has been a team effort, written as late as possible to the deadline to reflect as far as possible the effects of the pandemic in real time. As well as offering an overview, we hope it will function as a document of early responses and reactions in this uncertain time and a means of stimulating and maintaining dialogue aimed at effecting positive change in the Black Country.



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# Executive Summary

This report is written in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The uncertainty associated with this increases the challenge of reflecting on the past to plan for the future. This is why the discussion of each area of education and employment examines both historical data and the experiences of practitioners and professionals who are directly addressing the crisis, which has made education even more fast-moving and unpredictable than usual.

The Black Country faces particular challenges that are likely to be exacerbated by the pandemic. It has an above average number of children and young people living in disadvantage and poverty and both more residents without qualifications and fewer residents with higher level skills than the national average. COVID-19 risks destroying many of the gains made in recent years and it will require intelligent policy-making in support of committed practitioners to reduce and to recover from its effects.

The report is testimony to the innovative responses that have already been made in all areas of education. The rapid adoption of online learning and teaching has been unprecedented and seen across all phases, but fears remain about the inequalities of access to the internet. As we move into the post-digital era discussed in the final section of this report, this digital divide risks magnifying the difficulties faced by the most vulnerable children and young people, which schools in particular have often struggled to address.

Concerns were also raised about levels of anxiety among children and young people and adults and many teachers and school leaders expressed the hope that when education restarts post-pandemic, attempts are made to reduce the pressures on everyone in schools. Similarly, professionals involved in SEND provision emphasised the importance of prioritising emotional health and wellbeing over academic attainment in that area.

All of this must be seen against the context of the UK economy having experienced its largest contraction on record - a reduction of 20.4%. This has already had a significant impact on employment and employment opportunities in the Black Country. This is likely to affect most severely those groups most affected by the health impacts of COVID-19, notably the BAME community and particularly the Black community which has a very high proportion of workers in the health and social care sector, as well as disadvantaged and low-skilled groups. The voices included in this report underline the crucial role that education has to play if these negative consequences are to be avoided or at least reduced.





# Early Years and Childhood Education

Zeta-Williams Brown and Chris Pascal



## The importance of the early years

A child's early years are critically important to their later development. Evidence (UNICEF 2019) has consistently demonstrated that:

- *The brain develops most rapidly during this phase of a child's life.*
- *The impact of early disadvantage on children can be significantly reduced through positive early interventions, which can have a positive effect on areas such as their growth and cognitive and social development.*
- *High quality early years support helps children to succeed and achieve more at school.*
- *Investing in high quality early years provision provides a significant net social and economic benefit to society.*

It is thus clear that addressing disadvantage in the Black Country to improve outcomes in later life and produce an economically stable sub-region means ensuring that children in this area have positive experiences in the early years. As we write, we are experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, as well as reflecting on the most recent early years statistics in the Black Country, we cannot but recognise that the early years have been significantly affected by the pandemic. This discussion concludes with an early consideration of this and provides an example of how local authorities (LAs) and early years providers in the Black Country have attempted to adapt in the face of the pandemic to maintain support for parents and children.

## Austerity and child poverty

In the last ten years, the income of less well-off families has been affected by severe cuts in benefits and higher housing costs, leading to increases in poverty. Being in work does not prevent poverty as two-thirds of child poverty occurs in working families and in the last year absolute child poverty has risen. Poverty restricts children's life chances and is the best predictor of low educational achievement, poor health and a range of other impediments to being able to lead a fulfilling life. In the Black Country, around 4 in 10 children are currently growing up in poverty but this varies between different areas. Data released by the End Child Poverty coalition (Stone and Hirsch, 2019) shows the proportion of children in families struggling to survive financially. According to the study, Sandwell has the highest levels of child poverty in the Black Country, as Table 1 illustrates.

Table 1. Percentage of children living in poverty in the Black Country by LA (2017/2018)

Local Authority	Percentage of children living in poverty
Dudley	34%
Sandwell	43%
Walsall	41%
Wolverhampton	39%

Source: Stone & Hirsch (2019)

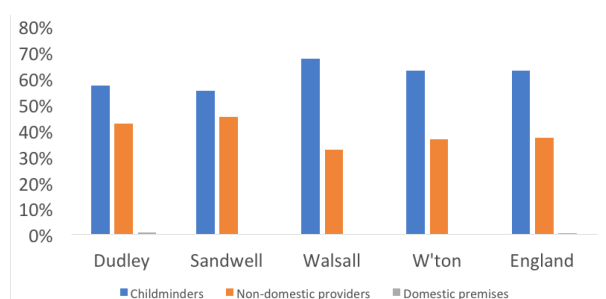
High quality early childhood education and health and family-support services delivered by the public and voluntary sectors help ameliorate some of the debilitating effects of child poverty, but they cannot address all the impediments to life chances and success which result from being raised in a household living in economic hardship. Recent research from the Child Poverty Action Group (Hirsch, 2019) and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF, 2020) show how regressive current policies have been. The JRF (2020) research shows that more than 44% of children nationally are now living in households whose income puts them below an adequate standard of living and that child poverty is now at its highest level since 2010. It argues that reducing poverty is dependent on change in three areas of public policy: developing an industrial strategy that delivers an economy that works for all; fixing Universal Credit; and improving the supply of affordable housing.

The crisis in public finances and the consequent reduction in public services has had a disproportionate impact on the poorest sectors of societies in England. It has also impacted disproportionately on families with young children, leading to a double disadvantage for the most disadvantaged groups which is likely to have long term impact on children's educational attainment and social mobility. Poor families with young children have been the most severely affected by austerity policies. Informal family learning in community spaces contributes to the development of young citizens in areas such as building resilience, acquiring positive learning dispositions and developing executive learning functions, all of which are associated with successful educational outcomes. This connection between school outcomes and informal learning, particularly in urban environments, is under-researched and vital to many communities experiencing austerity (Pascal et al., 2019).

## Early years provision in the Black Country

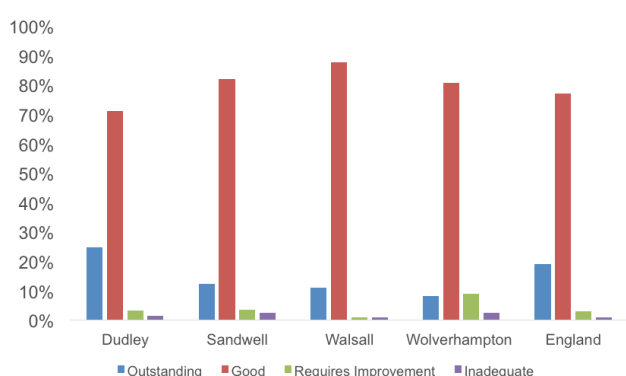
The majority of childcare providers registered with Ofsted in England are based in non-domestic premises (nurseries, pre-schools, holiday clubs and other group based settings) or childminders. In the Black Country, Walsall has a higher percentage of childminder providers than England overall. Dudley and Sandwell have higher percentages of childcare providers in non-domestic premises.

Figure 1. Provider types in the Black Country



Ofsted data shows that the quality of early years provision in the Black Country remains high. Figure 2 shows that the majority of settings remain good or outstanding. This is comparable with the national figures which show that in 2019 96% of childcare providers on the Early Years Register were judged good or outstanding (Ofsted, 2019). Dudley remains the highest rate of outstanding providers in the Black Country and remains the only one of the four Black Country LAs that is above the national average in this respect. Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton continue to have higher than the national average levels of good early years provision. It is important to note that many of these settings offer high quality provision in local contexts of significant child poverty.

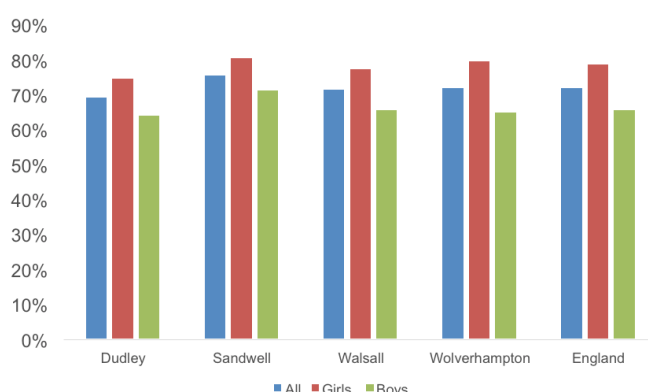
Figure 2. Early years provision in the Black Country by Ofsted rating



## Assessment of child outcomes

The 'good level of development' assessment requires children to reach the expected level in communication and language; physical development; personal, social and emotional development; literacy; and mathematics. In comparing the last two years data on 'good level of development' it is clear that provision in the Black Country has improved in this regard. In 2019 we reported that the proportion of children who achieved the Government's target of a 'good level of development' in the LAs ranged between 66% and 72%. In 2018 this left that all four LAs below the national average. Figure 3 illustrates that in 2019 Sandwell and Wolverhampton matched or were above the national average and Walsall and Dudley were slightly below it (Ofsted, 2019).

Figure 3. Children achieving a 'good level of development' in the Black Country



## Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

This year the COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented crisis, which has affected almost every aspect of our communities. For children, we can see it already affecting their mental and physical health, their safety and wellbeing, and their learning and development. For those living in less advantaged communities this is likely to have long term and profound consequences which should be of great concern to everyone in the Black Country. The case study included here offers an example of how a project focusing on early communication, speech and language support has adapted to the lockdown.



## Case study: The Black Country Early Outcomes project

The Early Outcomes project is a year-long project funded by the Department of Education that started in August 2019. Working together, the four Black Country LAs have focused on addressing weaknesses and raising standards in speech, language and communication (SLC). The project's main objectives are to improve multi-agency collaboration and reduce siloed working, focusing on early identification by upskilling the wider workforce.

The project also has an unprecedented interdisciplinary approach whereby 12 education professionals, health visitors and speech and language therapists (SALT) from all four LAs were seconded to work together on the project. There has also been a strong partnership established with the National Literacy Trust. The Education Observatory was commissioned in August 2019 to evaluate the project's outputs. So far these have included

- *Pop-up literacy hubs organised in collaboration with the National Literacy Trust in identified areas of need to support parents and children.*
- *NLT Hello training provided to practitioners that includes a toolkit to develop practice and promote young children's language development from birth to 5.*
- *Developing a universal Health/SALT pathway of services across the Black Country.*
- *Early Talk Boost training provided to practitioners, an evidence-based SLC intervention for children aged 3-4 produced by ICAN.*
- *Consultation with professionals, settings, parents and children to develop a Black Country supporting school readiness document*

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the project team were in the process of expanding these activities to share practice and resources more widely across the LAs. This included the completion of a SLC exhibition for practitioners in Dudley's Looking Glass exhibition focusing on the home learning environment, due to open after Easter 2020. In March 2020 at the beginning of the lockdown, the project team decided to adopt an online approach to supporting parents and children. This involved:

- *Creating a series of book packs to replace the face to face literacy hubs with the National Literacy Trust. The packs include electronic links to the book, home-based activities associated with it and tips for parents/carers about supporting their child's language development. These will also be available as a website and hard copies are being distributed to families with no internet and who do not access schools or settings via the health visitor/SALT services.*
- *Delivering the Early Talk and Early Talk Boost training online.*
- *Creating an Early Outcomes pack with information on health visitors, SALT, attachment and bonding, social and emotional development, activities for children 0-5, the communication-friendly environment and supporting communication development. This is intended to be a reference document for practitioners working with parents and as a tool to evaluate and develop practice together.*

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# Primary Education

Michael Jopling and Matt Smith



In the first Black Country report in 2019, the discussion of primary schools focused largely on the outcomes of the key accountability measures such as progress at Key Stage 2, attainment data and comparative Ofsted ratings, comparing average scores for schools in the Black Country LAs with outcomes at regional and national levels. Writing as primaries are grappling with the challenges of reopening (or not) following the COVID-19 lockdown and the prospect of ongoing disruption continuing to widen the gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children, these data seem increasingly irrelevant. As other sections of this report outline, we know that many areas of the Black Country are characterised by high levels of disadvantage and many children live in poverty. The effects of the pandemic are only likely to make this worse and magnify the effects of children's education. Therefore, this discussion of primary schools focuses more on the context and characteristics of Black Country schools than the performance data that is affected by these contextual factors. This leaves more space for analysis of responses to a short questionnaire survey of primary school leaders and teachers in Black Country schools conducted in May and June 2020. This explored how they responded to the lockdown, the extent to which they were able to continue to engage their pupils in learning and their hopes and fears for the future.

## Primary schools in the Black Country.

According to DfE data[1], there are 329 primary schools in the Black Country, which make up 19 per cent of West Midlands primaries. They cater for 122,146 pupils, or 23 per cent of West Midlands primary schoolchildren. Sandwell has the highest number of schools and pupils and Wolverhampton has the lowest. In terms of school type, almost half of Wolverhampton primaries are academies (49%, including one free school). This contrasts with 28 per cent primary academies in Dudley, 22 per cent in Sandwell and 20 per cent in Walsall.

If we take the number of children eligible for and claiming free school meals as an indicator of disadvantage, all the Black Country LAs are above the national average for primaries (15.8) and all but Dudley are above the West Midlands average (18.7). Wolverhampton has the highest percentage (25.8), followed by Walsall (23.7), Sandwell (20.1) and Dudley (16.3).

Table 2 highlights the variations in the school workforce data[2] across the Black Country. Dudley has the largest average overall workforce and both more classroom teachers and more male teachers proportionally than the other LAs, as well as the lowest pupil-teacher ratio. Sandwell has the most teaching assistants and teachers from BAME backgrounds on average. Sandwell also has the lowest level of sickness absence, almost exactly half of that in Dudley. Wolverhampton has the smallest average school workforce overall, in terms of both classroom teachers and teaching assistants.

Table 2. Average (mean) headcounts and other characteristics by primary school

	Dudley	Sandwell	Walsall	Wolverhampton
Workforce	66.64	62.97	55.99	48.94
Classroom teachers	22.34	14.74	16.15	14.47
Teaching assistants	17.61	22.94	19.02	15.88
BAME teachers	6.73	15.17	12.08	14.09
Male teachers	24.89	20.64	16.35	16.85
Pupil-teacher ratio	21.01	22.39	23.00	21.85
Days lost to sickness	129.39	64.50	99.63	69.81

Finally, in terms of Ofsted gradings, the percentage of schools in Wolverhampton (90%) rated good or outstanding at the last inspection was higher than the West Midlands (85%) and national (88%) figures. This compared with 76% in Dudley, 83% in Sandwell and 84% in Walsall (84%). Sandwell had the most outstanding schools (20%) in the Black Country, more than the national (17%) and regional averages (16%). In Walsall 15% of schools were outstanding, in Wolverhampton this was 14% and in Dudley it was 6%.

## Performance

Here we offer only a brief overview of progress and attainment in Black Country primary schools. It should be noted that current DfE school performance data does not take pupils' backgrounds or level of disadvantage into account, and comparisons between outcomes for disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children were not available.

The progress measure used at Key Stage 2 aims to capture the progress that pupils make from the end of Key Stage 1 (when pupils are typically aged 7) to the end of Key Stage 2 and primary school (when pupils are typically aged 11). It compares pupils' results with those of other pupils nationally with similar prior attainment, although the measures themselves remain controversial. The 2019 data reveals that Wolverhampton and Sandwell outperformed England as a whole, and the West Midlands in particular, in Reading, Writing and Maths. Walsall schools did better in Maths than both the region and national figures, but worse in Reading and Maths. Dudley were below the national and regional averages in all three subjects and consistently below the other Black Country LAs. It remains to be seen how the effects of the COVID-19 school closures affect the learning and achievement of children in primary schools over the next few years.

## Primary leaders' and teachers' views on the effects of COVID-19

We undertook a short, opportunistic survey of leaders and teachers in West Midland primary schools in May and June 2020. It was distributed through professional networks and the university's partner schools and we received 24 responses from staff in Black Country schools. This analysis offers an illustrative snapshot of their views at a time when primaries were either preparing to reopen after the lockdown or actually reopening. Due to the small number of respondents, percentages have not been used in the analysis and it is not suggested that they are representative

Ten of the respondent educators were teachers; the others were headteachers/principals (n=6), deputy or assistant headteachers (n=6) or phase/subject leaders (n=2). Seven were based in primary academies and all but four had been in their current job for more than 1-2 years.

Two worked across three LAs, which included both Walsall and Sandwell. The typical respondent is female (n=19), works in a school with between 201 and 300 pupils (n=11) in Walsall (n=13), has been in post for 6-10 years (n=11), and has more than 16 years' experience in education overall (n=10).

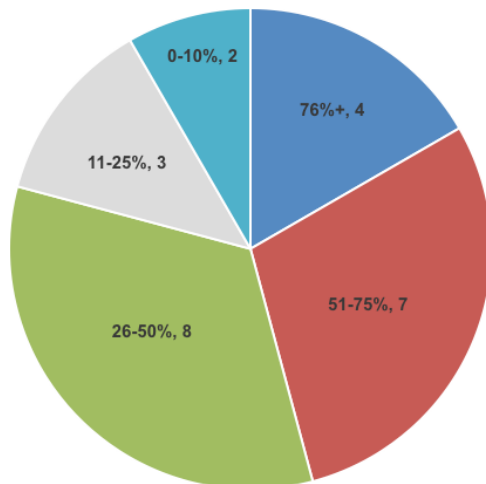
### How have staff in primaries been affected by the closure of schools?

Educators were asked how the closure of schools had affected them personally. Only one, a teacher, stated that they had not been affected at all (although they did identify ways in which colleagues had been affected). The most common response was increased anxiety (n=19), followed by difficulty in balancing work with other responsibilities such as caring (n=14) and increased workload (n=13). One teacher/SENCO described it as "Just a different way of working; (I have) differing priorities to my roles prior to COVID-19." A headteacher was less sanguine, emphasising "Far less sleep. The volume of, and contradictions in, guidance shared by the DfE has been overwhelming". They were also asked how colleagues had been affected by the closure. Here 22 of the 24 respondents identified increased anxiety as the most common outcome, followed by difficulty in balancing work with other responsibilities (n=19), and in adjusting to online working (n=17). Workload in general was a less significant factor (n=10).

### How have primaries attempted to ensure children keep learning?

Asked how they had tried to ensure that children in their schools were able to continue to learn, online learning was the most common solution used (n=19), followed by sending work home (n=17). Focusing on safeguarding and ensuring that families and colleagues were safe were less common answers, although half of the educators (n=12) stated they had focused on all of these areas. Figure 4 indicates the proportion of children they estimated had accessed these arrangements. It shows that just under half of educators (n=11) felt that more than half of children in their schools had accessed learning.

Figure 4. Estimations of the proportion of children who have accessed arrangements to ensure learning continues



Asked why these numbers were not higher, a number of interdependent factors were identified. The most significant was the lack of technology of home, cited by almost three-quarters of educators (n=17). This was followed by parents working (n=12) or being unable to help (n=12) and children not engaging (n=11). Parents' unwillingness to help was a slightly less significant factor (n=9). One headteacher noted that "take-up has been very high due to the extreme diligence and perseverance of staff. Communication has been the key". Another identified the scale of the challenges their pupils have faced: "Children have struggled with the abrupt change in routine and managing the idea of their adults as educators". However, almost three-quarters of the educators interviewed were confident (n=9) or very confident (n=8) that vulnerable children in their school continue to be supported.

### Rethinking primary schools

The final (open) question asked educators to consider how they thought schools could or should be rethought in the light of the lockdown experience. Seventeen educators offered their ideas. These can be clustered into five areas. The first focused on schools at a macro, system level. All of those who addressed such issues were headteachers/principals. The first (with over 24 years' experience) was clear that:

**“ Schools should have more trust. Accountability measures should rest between schools and the LA. The LA have also stepped up and know our schools. SATs and Ofsted have proved to be very unnecessary. Neither have been useful.**

Another headteacher felt that the increased time children had spent with their families should also be viewed positively and suggested making (unspecified) changes to the structure of the school day or school term. In addition, two headteachers identified more specifically the need for better, more consistent advice. One stated:

**“ We need scientific advice about how in a busy primary school we should do to socially distance. The scientists need to know the intricate workings of a school. Science is only useful if the research is active in the field.**

Two educators focused more on the second area: how vulnerable children are supported. A teacher working in one of the largest primaries surveyed (with over 500 children) suggested: "A massive rethink needs to be had on social care. This crisis has shown just how much schools are about so much more than teaching and learning". An assistant head identified a need for additional support in "pastoral care and support of vulnerable children. Teachers should focus on educating children and other experts should be available in schools to support families."

The third area was technology. Two teachers highlighted the benefits of using online approaches for both children (homework) and colleagues (meetings and training). One teacher echoed other areas of the survey in highlighting the need to "make technology available to less well-off families". Issues relating to curriculum and assessment were also evident. A phase leader emphasised the importance of relationships in school, which sometimes gets lost in the dominant focus on academic work and outcomes. A headteacher felt children had gained considerably from being involved in different kinds of activities such as fundraising, baking, and reading and learning for pleasure.



However, the English lead also highlighted the need to look at “assessment and expectations” because children have missed so much school. This respondent also highlighted the final area, health and wellbeing, which related both to mental health (for children and adults in schools) and physical health through not reverting to driving to school. One headteacher felt in particular that is was “vital that schools take on board a restorative approach and focus on wellbeing”.

### **What does this mean for primary schools in the Black Country?**

There are many issues which could be highlighted from this snapshot survey. Here are three we feel are among the most important:

- *Leaders and teachers in schools have worked very hard to ensure children have been able to access learning and the curriculum, but anxiety levels remain high among both children and adults. This means that more attention will have to be paid to the mental health and wellbeing of everyone in primary schools whenever schools open more fully.*

- *Lack of access to technology remains a significant, and often unseen, barrier to many children's learning, particularly when schools are much more reliant on online learning and teaching. This compounds other effects of poverty and disadvantage, although it should not be assumed that technology should be used to replace the role of teachers in supporting children.*
- *This is an opportunity to rethink or rebalance primary education and potentially reduce the accountability pressures on everyone in schools, broaden the curriculum, and improve support for vulnerable children.*

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# Secondary Education

Sally Riordan and Sean Starr

## **The extra barriers Black Country schools face**

In 2019, the GCSE attainment of students across the Black Country dropped further behind students nationally. Their lower attainment largely reflects the demographic of the area. The Black Country has a higher proportion of students eligible for free school meals than other areas of England and this has been rising at a faster rate than nationally. Our research also indicates that school leaders in the Black Country are more likely to be suffering negative consequences following past Ofsted inspections and remain under pressure to raise their Ofsted rating. Although all schools are facing extreme challenges during COVID-19, in the Black Country they are exacerbated by the pressures of having to provide for large numbers of vulnerable children and manage external pressures from government, Ofsted and society more generally. As one school leader told us, "I am really concerned about a blame culture focused on schools. We are trying to do our best." In recent years, schools in the region have made significant strides in the support they provide for students facing socio-economic disadvantages. The Black Country witnessed a rise in the Progress 8 scores of children eligible for free school meals in 2019, but with staff, students, and their families now facing the traumas of the COVID-19 pandemic, these small gains are looking fragile.

## **GCSE performance of students in the Black Country**

On the face of it, all local authorities in the Black Country witnessed an increase in their schools' GCSE results in 2019, especially Sandwell. However, the increases do not match the national average, so that local authorities that have been on par with national averages in previous years are now struggling to keep apace of national rises. One reason for the overall decline across Dudley, Walsall and Wolverhampton is the significant increase in these regions of the proportion of students eligible for free school meals. The Black Country has always served a higher proportion of students from lower-income homes than the national average, but the numbers of students eligible for free school meals rose again in 2019.

## **Against the Odds and the progress gap**

The Education Observatory has been conducting national research on behalf of the Social Mobility Commission. The purpose of the Against the Odds study has been to investigate the progress gap between students facing socio-economic disadvantages and their more affluent peers. We now know that Black Country schools are using many similar strategies to schools across England to support students from lower-income homes, but they are having more success than elsewhere at reducing the progress gap. In all Black Country local authorities the progress gap reduced in 2019.

There is one discernible way that the Black Country is taking a different approach to supporting students from lower-income homes than elsewhere in England. Schools in the region are more likely to provide alternative qualification routes for their students. One consequence of this is that students eligible for free school meals are less likely to pass the E-Baccalaureate in the Black Country than in the rest of England.

## **Schools' experiences of COVID-19**

Our Against the Odds work has given us an insight into the pupil premium strategies of almost 300 schools across England. We spoke with senior leaders from six secondary schools in the Black Country to reflect on their experiences of these extraordinary times, when schools have been closed to most children, remote learning has been rapidly set up, and school sites are open for small numbers of students, even outside of term time, but in drastically changed circumstances. Some secondary schools in the Black Country are taking a hub approach, where children of key workers, vulnerable children, and staff from a number of schools have been located at one site. Most hubs across the region serve between 6 and 40 children. Other schools are serving only their own students, the numbers of children are consequently smaller, typically ranging from 2 to 15.

Staff are supporting these young people on a rota basis. Schools are minimising the numbers of staff on site and limiting their contact time with students, typically to 1.5 or 3 hours. In schools we have spoken to, one member of the senior leadership team is always on site to support both students and staff. Most commonly, students



access materials on computers whilst they are supervised by teachers or teaching assistants. Students who are at home have access to the same materials via the school's platform or paid-for external platforms. Efforts are made to ensure the same offer is available for all and hence these materials are sent to students unable to access them online. Assessment and monitoring of students' work have been sporadic, given the reactive nature of building remote learning, but schools are developing mechanisms to provide feedback to students. In some cases, students are being offered streamed or recorded video lessons, most commonly for students in years 10 and 12. Because they are concerned about safeguarding issues, some schools have opted not to do this.

Schools have developed routines to support vulnerable students at home, including regular phone calls, often by a senior staff member. Some schools are rolling this out for all students, via their form tutors, to support student wellbeing. Schools are acutely aware this current situation is putting a strain on resources and on the wellbeing of their staff, students and their families. Some senior leadership teams are therefore putting similar procedures in place, albeit by email, to monitor staff wellbeing. School leaders are aware that the conversion to remote learning may increase workload and anxiety and that staff may be under additional stress due to their personal circumstances. "Our teachers worried they are not setting enough work," one senior leader explained to us, "we need to constantly reassure them." One of the biggest challenges has been to manage and respond to the communication and mixed messages from the Department for Education, as well as other agencies, including the press. Senior leaders are united in this, reporting that, "The flow of information from different organisations can be contradictory and confusing," and "We keep getting updates from the DfE overnight, but finding time to assimilate them is difficult." Schools were given very little time, for example, to determine who is eligible for on-site provision under the key-worker scheme. Staff are concerned that the lack of clarity will ultimately cause a breakdown in their relationships with parents and carers. Consequently, many schools are prioritising regular home communications: "When we go back communication with our parents will be critical".

Staff are also anxious that the full return to school is achieved. There is much concern about social distancing in classrooms, in corridors and during break and lunchtimes. Some Black Country classrooms will barely hold 8 students if the 2 metre rule is applied and it is already a strain to meet social-distancing conditions with

small numbers of students: "We are finding social distancing during such times difficult. Children just want to socialise." Staff are also worried about, and reflecting on, how to support students moving between key stages and exam-focused years, and students transferring schools. There are high levels of concern in the Black Country around accountability and the role that Ofsted will play when schools return. Leaders would like clear expectations. They are under increased pressure to keep all students on top of their learning, especially the most vulnerable and those facing socio-economic disadvantage, in addition to safeguarding and supporting the mental and physical health of all their children. Our schools are busy facing the daily challenges of meeting changing and extraordinary demands from many quarters, with the long-term impacts on students' futures both uncertain and unfathomable.



# Further education and Adult learning

Matthew Johnson



## The adult education budget and inclusive growth

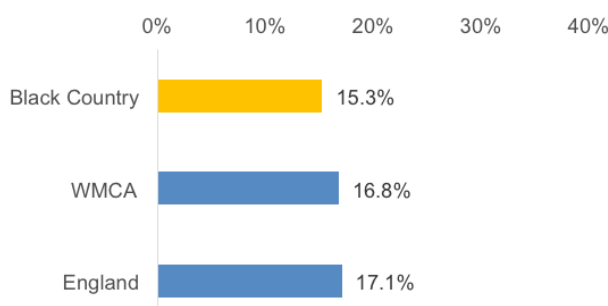
The West Midlands Combined Authority recently agreed two devolution deals worth more than £1.4bn over 30 years to drive an £8bn investment programme (WMCA 2020). As part of this, the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) took responsibility for the region's Adult Education Budget (AEB) and how it is delivered from the 2019/20 academic year. The funding is targeted to align with priority growth sectors, particularly those targeted through the Local Industrial Strategy, to increase skill levels in communities to secure sustainable employment and enhance skills at higher levels. Fundamental to this is the strategy of inclusive growth, which is core to the local skills agenda. The strategy aims to: "deliver inclusive growth by giving more people the skills to get and sustain good jobs and careers".

The devolution of AEB presents an opportunity for the region to improve the impact of public investment in skills in support of inclusive growth through approaches such as:

- *Targeting AEB funding at places and communities experiencing high levels of unemployment, with a particular focus on young people, as well as seeking to improve overall levels of skills, employment and income across the region.*
- *Increasing the proportion of AEB used to support Level 3 and 4 qualifications in priority sectors.*

This is fundamentally important because as we see below there is a gap between Level 3 and Level 4 qualifications, compared to the national average (NOMIS, 2020). At level 3 the Black Country gap is -1.5% below the average regionally and -1.8% lower than the national average, as Figure 5 illustrates,

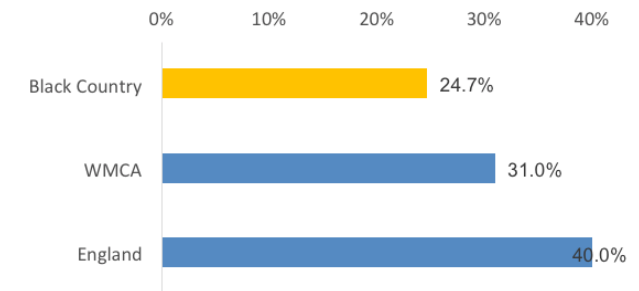
Figure 5. Working age population with Level 3 qualifications in the Black Country (2019)



As Figure 6 indicates, at Level 4 the gap between the regional and national averages is starker.

At the West Midlands metropolitan level the Black Country gap is -6.3%. This gap increases to -15.3% when compared to the national average.

Figure 6. Working age population with Level 4 qualifications in the Black Country (2019)



However, while the numbers of residents taking part in higher level courses is important, we must also consider the nature of provision and the courses they take. It is critical that increasing access to higher level skills is complemented by the quality and relevance of these acquired skills. The AEB has allowed for more flexibility to shape the nature of provision around local economic and social needs.

## Covid-19 and adult provision

The flexibility to shape adult learning at the local level appears to have been particularly necessary during the COVID-19 crisis. For example, commissioned training providers swiftly adapted to move adult education training courses online or by telephone for learners without internet access. The WMCA launched its COVID support service which provides residents with information as to how they can access training courses in areas such as network security and management. However, despite this it is clear that COVID-19 presents one of the biggest challenges the adult skills sector has ever faced. The nature of local industry has encountered an economic shock and the nature of the recovery is still unknown. Undoubtedly, there will be fundamental and rapid shifts in how sectors operate, particularly in areas such as retail and manufacturing. Therefore, dialogue between providers and employers will need to be closer than ever in order to prepare today's learners for the economy of the future.

## References

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<https://www.wmca.org.uk/what-we-do/productivity-skills/adult-education-budget/> [accessed 12 May 2020] NOMIS (2020) Annual Population Survey





# Higher education

Brendan Bartram and David Thompson



This section considers the current context of higher education (HE) in the Black Country and broader West Midlands region in relation to issues of access, participation and other contemporary challenges.

## Access and participation

The role of HE in widening personal and professional opportunities for young people and the communities they live in is well-established (Cotton, Kneale and Nash, 2013). It is therefore useful to examine recent HESA figures that provide some insight into the extent to which such opportunities are being realised in the Black Country. As the following tables show (based on the most recently available data), there are many positive signs here, particularly in comparison with other parts of the region and the country as a whole. That said, as Table 3 reveals, there is clearly more to be done across the West Midlands as a whole with regard to increasing the number of students from low participation neighbourhoods.

Table 3. Percentage of under-represented groups by region (UK young full time first degree entrants in 2016/17 to 2017/18)

Region	From low participation neighbourhoods	From state schools & colleges	Total young entrants
North East	23.9%	93.3%	11,305
North West	16.4%	94.4%	35,140
Yorkshire & the Humber	18.3%	93.2%	24,150
East Midlands	15.1%	92.0%	21,335
West Midlands	13.2%	91.9%	28,585
East of England	11.4%	88.4%	29,345
London	2.0%	86.5%	56,785
South East	9.3%	84.1%	46,595
South West	14.1%	88.1%	23,860
Wales	15.7%	95.1%	14,185
Scotland		88.5%	22,375
Northern Ireland	7.2%	99.8%	10,900
Total UK	11.6%	89.8%	324,8

Tables 4-6 reveal the variations in the numbers and proportions of under-represented groups among the student populations in four West Midlands universities between 2016/17 and 2017/18. The data were published by HESA in 2019.

Table 4. Participation of young students from state schools in higher education (UK domiciled full-time undergraduate entrants in 2016/17 to 2017/18)

University	Students	Percentage
Wolverhampton	2235	98
Birmingham City	4430	98
Birmingham	4345	82
Aston	2535	94

Table 5. Participation of mature students with no previous HE experience in higher education (UK domiciled full-time undergraduate entrants in 2016/17 to 2017/18)

University	Students	Percentage
Wolverhampton	355	16
Birmingham City	155	14
Birmingham	20	9.5
Aston	15	10.5

Table 6. Participation of students in higher education who are in receipt of Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) (UK domiciled undergraduates in 2016/17 to 2017/18)

University	Students	Percentage
Wolverhampton	915	7.7
Birmingham City	845	5.2
Birmingham	965	5.3
Aston	465	4.9

## Aspire to HE

Aspire to HE is a partnership funded through the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) and led by the University of Wolverhampton to support the government's goal to increase the number of disadvantaged young people entering HE by 2020. It builds on previous initiatives, most notably AimHigher (Cotton, Kneale and Nash, 2013). NCOP supports 29 consortia across the country to work with young people from targeted postcodes. Aspire to HE covers the areas of Sandwell and Dudley, Walsall, Wolverhampton and Telford and Wrekin, and the HESA data outlined in Tables 4-6 suggest that the initiative has achieved some success.

The Aspire to HE consortium is made up of the University of Wolverhampton working in partnership with six FE colleges and more than 25 secondary schools to support informed, ambitious decision-making with regard to HE. It was formed when the University secured over £8 million in funding to help increase the number of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to progress into HE.. Aspire to HE works by bringing together the resources and expertise of local schools, colleges, charities, businesses, and the experienced widening participation staff at the University of Wolverhampton's Hub to create opportunities for young people who have the ability to succeed in HE but who may lack the skills, information or understanding necessary to enter HE. neighbourhoods.

## HE and COVID-19

At the time of writing, numerous concerns have inevitably been expressed about the potential long-term effects of the COVID-19 outbreak. The enforced shift to online learning and teaching in March 2020 understandably generated many challenges and much speculation about the immediate future of HE. In a new book focusing on contemporary issues in HE, Bartram (2020) identifies some of the possible consequences of the pandemic for HE. Alongside the obvious budgetary implications of huge income losses driven by dramatic dips in the recruitment of "financially lucrative" international students from countries such as China and India, the possibility of an equally devastating crisis of identity is also identified. If universities are successful in their responses to the outbreak and demonstrate that online pedagogic operations are an efficient, cost-effective route

to gaining a degree, both home and international students may begin to question the need for physical attendance and the importance of communal learning and living spaces. Our own experience is that some students have benefitted from the increased freedom of working virtually, in terms of both flexibility and comfort. Students have reported saying they have enjoyed engaging in online activities and being less inhibited in asking questions (as opposed to being reluctant to put their hand up in lectures). Another advantage has been for very busy students working long hours who have been able to engage in the uploaded content and some of the online lectures that previously may have clashed with work commitments. However, students without a quiet study place within the home find it difficult to access activities and online seminars and usually prefer to work in the library away from the noise of their home. A number of students have also been in the frontline of COVID-19 support. Whatever the months ahead bring, the University of Wolverhampton and other universities will have to try to address these challenges in ways that ensure their widening participation activities in the region are not compromised.

## References

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# Special Education Needs and Disability

Michelle Haywood and Stephanie Brewster

This section focuses on educational provision for children and young people with special educational needs and disability (SEND) and in particular on how this provision has responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown, which resulted in the closure of schools (to most children) on 20 March 2020. At the time of writing, it is still not clear how or when many schools will reopen. A child or young person is regarded as having a SEND if they have greater difficulty learning, or accessing mainstream educational provision, than most individuals of their age. This may be because of sensory impairment, physical impairment, learning difficulties or disabilities, an autistic spectrum condition, or speech, language or communication needs.

## Since 2019

In England as a whole, the number of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) has increased for a third consecutive year to 1,318,300 in January 2019 (the most recent statistics available)[1]. Likewise, the number of children with SEN also increased in all four Black Country LAs from 2018 to 2019. In England as a whole 14.9 per cent of the total school population have SEN. The corresponding figure for the West Midlands is higher (15.7%). Two of the Black Country LAs, Dudley and Wolverhampton, have even higher proportions (17.4% and 17.0% respectively). Sandwell (14.8%) and Walsall (13.7%) have fewer children and young people with SEND.

## Responses to COVID-19 and lockdown

In last year's report, we discussed how an inclusive ethos recognises that the environment (including social attitudes) can create barriers for children and young people labelled as having SEND and their families and that removing these barriers is an ongoing process that benefits everyone. In recent weeks and months there has been heated discussions about how the pandemic's effects are likely to be more severe and longer lasting among certain sectors of the population; children and young people with SEND are among these groups. These effects potentially relate not only to the health implications of the virus itself (with many within this group being formally identified as 'vulnerable'), but also the social impact on their families, many of whom are already struggling in a number of ways

As part of the response to COVID-19, educational settings have been asked to continue to provide care for a limited number of children and young people, including those who are vulnerable (including those with an education, health and care (EHC) plan). The Coronavirus (COVID-19): SEND risk assessment guidance published on 19 April 2020 states that of the those that need such care:

**“ Most of these children and young people attend special schools, specialist colleges and other specialist settings, but this guidance also applies to any mainstream educational setting caring for such children and young people.**

The risk assessments should consider not only health vulnerabilities (in terms of hygiene and social distancing), but also whether health and care needs can be met and educational services provided in the home environment, and the risk of involvement in dangerous behaviour or situations or requiring the involvement of a social worker.

Using our existing SEND networks in the Black Country and the West Midlands more widely, we invited education colleagues to share their responses to the following questions. The responses included the following:

### How has your school attempted to meet the needs of children with SEND during the pandemic?

- Using multiple online learning tools, phone, email etc.
- Staff training
- Early contact with parents to support online access
- Hard copy materials as an alternative
- Regular pastoral contact (more frequent for those on EHCPs) focusing on wellbeing
- Offering school places to those with EHCPs
- Providing structure and routine in learning activities
- Teacher-led learning and also peer interaction
- Signposting families to outside agencies and websites that offer support and guidance
- Regular monitoring of learning and engagement by class teachers and education welfare officers
- More specialist support from e.g. SENCO, educational psychologist

### **In what ways has the pandemic affected children with SEND and their families?**

- *Mental health and wellbeing is the highest priority*
- *Absence of usual networks of support for families*
- *Many parents are not taking up school places, preferring to shield their child from exposure to the virus*
- *Many parents struggling to home-school more than one child, and continue working*
- *Those with pre-existing mental health needs are especially vulnerable*
- *Some parents do not understand the learning activities their child is doing*
- *Extra support may be needed for participating with learning activities*
- *Some families are not engaging with schools*
- *Potential for developing an over-reliance on technology*
- *Concern about children falling behind, especially for ones refusing to participate in learning activities*
- *Some individuals, e.g. those with autistic spectrum conditions, prefer distance learning*
- *Returning to school will present particular challenges for children who usually struggle with school.*

For University of Wolverhampton students who are disabled or who have additional needs, many similar issues have arisen, particularly concerning health and wellbeing during lockdown. Access to technology has been supported by the provision of hardware and financial support to students in need. Efforts continue to be made to ameliorate threats to academic progress due to financial hardship due to loss of earnings, or a requirement to continue working in key worker roles, often alongside caring for and home schooling their own children.

[i] The most recent statistics were published in July 2019: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england-january-2019>

### **What lessons do you hope will be learned regarding educational provision for children with SEND?**

The experiences of school closure and social isolation have forced schools into a steep learning curve, which has included lessons that have much to contribute to improved practice even after the return to more 'normal' times. These include:

- *Emotional health and wellbeing should be prioritised over academic attainment*
- *The need for choice and flexibility to promote ownership of and engagement with learning*
- *Making space for informal learning, responsive to the child's interests, including life skills*
- *Reconsideration of assessment processes such as SATS*
- *The need for creativity and a willingness to take risks in trying new things*
- *The need to actively address inequalities exacerbated by current circumstances*
- *The need to protect EHCP support and the rights of disabled children and young people to appropriate education, health and care provision, all of which are currently under threat*





# Ethnicity, Employment and Skills

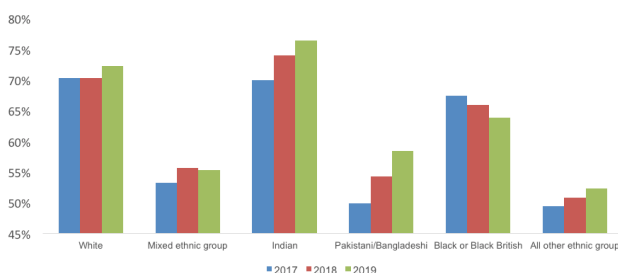
Matthew Johnson

It is not possible fully to understand the picture of employment and skills in the Black Country, without exploring some of its demographic nuances. One of the most important of these is ethnicity. The Black Country has a relatively high number of residents who are from a Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) background. According to the last census in 2011, 23 per cent of the Black Country's population has a BAME background, compared to approximately 15 per cent nationally. By the time of the next census in 2021, the percentage of BAME representation in the Black Country is forecast to have increased further. This section explores ethnicity in the context of employment and skills.

## Black Country employment by ethnicity

While the Black Country has a total employment rate of 70.4 per cent, Figure 7 segments this by ethnic group (NOMIS, 2020). Employment rates were consistently under 60 per cent in the Pakistani/Bangladeshi, mixed and other ethnic groups. Among Black or Black British individuals, employment rates have remained above 60 per cent but declined steadily between 2017 and 2019. Among those with Indian backgrounds, this movement has been in the opposite direction with employment climbing from 69.9 per cent in 2017 to 76.4 per cent in 2019. In 2018 and 2019, this group was higher than the White group.

Figure 7. Black Country employment by ethnicity (2017-19)

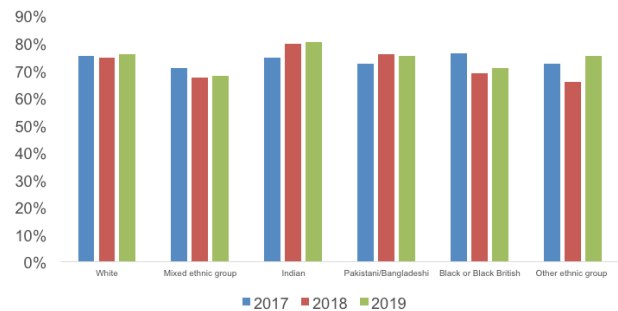


## Black Country employment by ethnicity and gender

Male employment rates have followed a similar pattern, as Figure 8 demonstrates. The highest rate in 2019 was among Indian men, but the rate for Pakistani/Bangladeshi men was only just below that of White men.

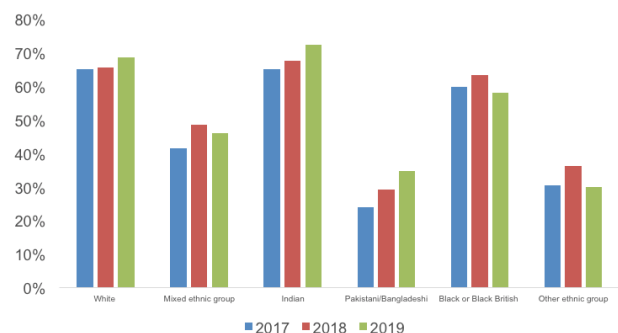
The Black male employment rate has been lower than other groups and more volatile, alongside the mixed and other groups.

Figure 8. Male employment in the Black Country by ethnicity (2017-19)



The differences between groups have been much greater among women, as Figure 9 indicates. In 2019 the employment rate varied between 30 per cent (other) and 72 per cent (Indian). The rate among Pakistani/Bangladeshi women was only 35 per cent, but this represented a considerable increase from 2017 (24%). White female employment increased slightly over the period, but Black female employment declined from 64 per cent to 58 per cent. The mixed and other ethnic groups female employment rates also declined.

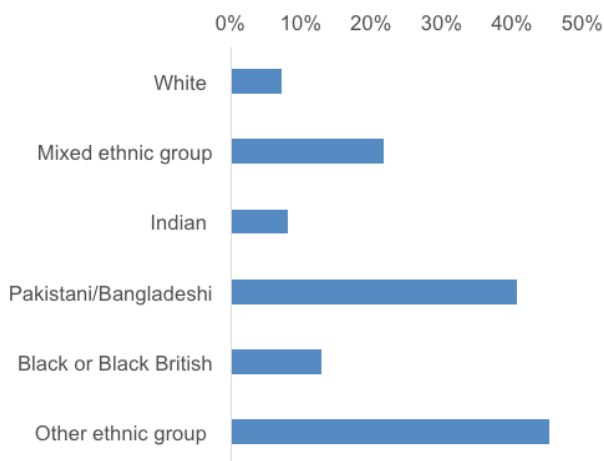
Figure 9. Female employment in the Black Country by ethnicity (2017-19)



## The gender gap in employment by ethnic group

Figure 10 illustrates the employment gender gap by ethnic group. The other ethnic group category has the largest gap, followed by the Pakistani/Bangladeshi group and the White and the Indian ethnic groups, where employment rates are the highest, have the smallest gaps.

Figure 10. Gender employment gap in the Black Country in 2019



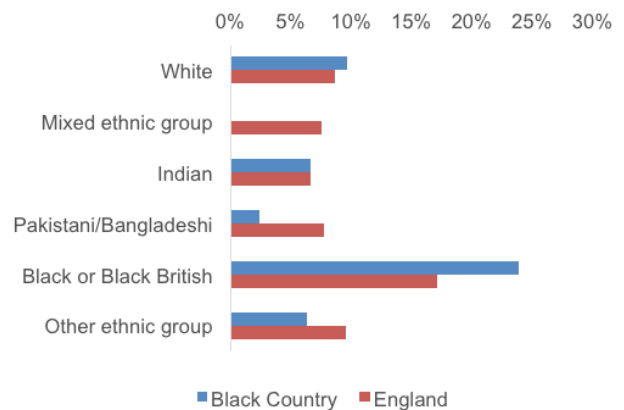
## COVID-19

Recent ONS data indicated the disproportionate effect that COVID-19 virus has had on ethnic minorities. Data indicates that people from Black ethnic groups have been four times as likely to die of the virus than people from White ethnic groups. While the evidence is still emerging as to why this is the case (with a government report offering some explanations), the fact that some ethnic groups are over-represented in occupations working directly with the virus has been recognised as a factor.

### Caring occupations

Ethnic minorities represent a sizable proportion of the health and social care sector. As Figure 11 indicates, in the Black community 25 per cent are employed in caring and leisure occupations in the Black Country, which is much higher than the proportion in England as a whole.

Figure 11. Employment in caring, leisure and other occupations in Black Country and England by ethnicity



## Higher skilled occupations

Figure 12 represents employment rates in the Black Country at the three highest skilled levels of occupations according to the Standard Occupation Classification 2010 by ethnicity. These include managers, directors and senior officials; professional occupations; and associate professionals and technical occupations. At almost 50 per cent, the Indian ethnic group had the highest proportion of workers in such professions in the Black Country in 2019, having increased significantly since 2017. The proportion in all other ethnic groups in 2019 was between 31-35%. These employees in higher skilled occupations are more likely to have been able to work from home during the pandemic, and less likely to have been furloughed.



Figure 12. Employment in higher skilled professions in the Black Country (2017-19)

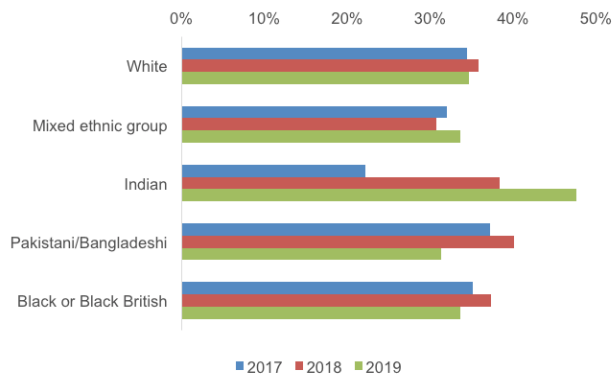
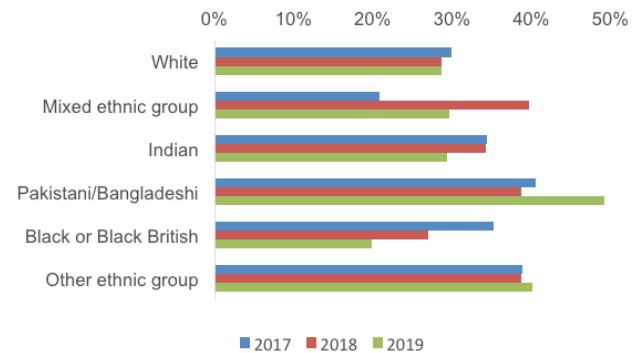


Figure 13. Employment in lower tier professions in the Black Country (2017-19)



## Lower skilled occupations

Figure 13 illustrates employment rates in the Black Country in lower tier levels of occupations according to the Standard Occupation Classification 2010 by ethnicity. These include sales/retail staff; process, plant and machine operatives; and elementary occupations. In 2019 the Pakistani/Bangladeshi ethnic group had the highest proportion of workers in lower-skilled occupations (just under 50%), followed by those classed in the other ethnic group. All other ethnic groups were below 30 per cent, with fewer Black or Black British workers in lower tiered skilled jobs (19%) than other groups, largely due to the high representation in the health and social care professions. These employees in lower skilled occupations are less likely to have been able to work from home during the pandemic and more likely to have been furloughed or to have lost their jobs.

## References

Census 2011

NOMIS (2020), Annual Population Survey



# Post-digital Black Country

Stuart Connor and Sarah Hayes

## (Post) Digital Skills

The measures taken in response to COVID-19 have brought to the fore debates about digital skills and how learning across the life course could, and should, be supported by a range of technologies, devices and applications. The lockdown measures taken in response to the pandemic have stimulated the development of a range of innovative solutions in a relatively short time period. Work, care, leisure and education practices are all being negotiated and redesigned in the light of this. In education, the challenges and opportunities of the 'learning anywhere, anytime' concept of digital education in a range of formats are increasingly self-evident (Jandrić and Hayes, 2020a, Jandrić and Hayes, 2020b, Watermeyer et. al., 2020). Current events have proved an intense and extensive reminder and foreshadowing of the digital skills that educators, administrators and students need in an uncertain, complex and changing world (Peters, et.al, 2020). However, in addition to asking how digital technologies can deliver on existing values and projects in formal education, it is argued that broader questions need to be asked and answered about the intended and unintended consequences, and opportunities, for digital technologies to reconfigure what we choose to do, what we value, and who we are. Examining these questions as 'post-digital' issues can help us to appreciate the many ways that digital is now increasingly embedded into the normal functioning of each of our lives, so that distinctions between 'digital' and 'human' are fading, but what was 'pre-digital' is still relevant to us. It is important to note too, that even if some people don't use digital devices themselves, digital systems and data will still use them, via public services to which they subscribe. What is clear is that in a post-digital and post-COVID society, in addition to ensuring opportunities for all to learn, to know and to learn to do, the pre- and post-digital skills of learning to live with, learning to transform and learning to be, will be just as vital.

## Black Country Digital Skills Plan

Advances in digital technology pose a number of challenges and opportunities for the Black Country. The Black Country Digital Skills Plan, produced by the Black Country Economic Intelligence Unit, has been developed in order to support the region's ability to embrace changes in digital technologies and grow core sectors to ensure that the region remains competitive in a global marketplace.

Digital change creates opportunities for innovation, growth and better life chances which means that upskilling and retraining people and developing the digital skills infrastructure are all key priorities. The Digital Skills Plan has two clear objectives:

- *Attracting more talent to the Black Country - supporting businesses to meet their immediate skills needs in the supply chain in relation to both ICT and digital technology skills.*
- *Closing the gap - Upskilling, broadening the talent pool and working to ensure the education system is more responsive to the needs of employers.*

Internet access and digital skills can offer a number of benefits to the individual. In the West Midlands there has been a significant increase in the percentage of internet users since 2012, although there is still considerable progress to be made when compared to other regions.

## Digital Skills and the pandemic

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted and potentially exacerbated inequalities and forms of exclusion (Graham, 2020; UNHCR, 2017) that still tend to be marginalised in discussions of digital skills and policies. As we see in other sections of this report, access to the internet and opportunities to develop digital skills varies considerably across different groups and there remain significant barriers to digital inclusion. While virtual classes on personal tablets or laptops may be the norm in some households, access and having the skills to make use of such opportunities cannot be assumed (Teach First, 2020). Unless access costs decrease and access quality increases, the gap in education outcomes will be further exacerbated.

Given the importance of digital skills, the digital divide between those who have access to technology and those who do not has the potential to create and exacerbate inequities in terms of access to opportunities, knowledge, services and goods. Those who are digitally excluded are likely to miss out on this digital dividend (Office for National Statistics, 2019). As such, the success of the skills plan will depend on, and need to be augmented by, an understanding of the barriers to inclusion (and how to dismantle or overcome them) and the post-digital contexts of individual learners (Jandrić and Hayes, 2020c).



## Getting Back to Normal?

The COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis that has proved a shock to political, economic and social systems, including education. Laudably and understandably, there have been efforts to 'keep calm and carry on'. When the schools were closed, broadcasters and a range of social platforms provided a range of suggestions and resources for home schooling. Colour-coded schedules, lesson plans and curated resources that shadowed school timetables are readily available. Online learning tools (from live broadcasts, YouTube clips, 'educational influencers' and virtual reality experiences) have been augmented with synchronous face-to-face video tutorials and instruction. Whether curated by individuals, or configured and contracted by institutions, consortia and coalitions with diverse stakeholders from across a mixed economy are coming together to negotiate and sustain learning through the crisis.

A period of crisis has the potential to stress and destabilise existing relations and practices and can lead to the introduction of changes and measures previously regarded as unthinkable "under normal circumstances" (Birkland, 2006; Boin, McConnell and Hart, 2008). Following the work of Kuhn (1963), Hall (1993) and Hay (1999, 2001), what may have previously been considered "entrepreneurial", "maverick" or "extreme" positions can quickly be accepted within the new mainstream. Change at this point tends to be relatively rapid, revolutionary and radical (i.e. from the root) as relations and practices are transformed. Parameters that previously circumscribed the reasonable of options are redrawn and replaced. In what is described as an "exceptional period", new spaces are opened.

What is notable with respect to responses to the Coronavirus are the myriad of social experiments with technology that are taking place in homes and institutions across the country as people find ways to contend with the new conditions (Jandrić and Hayes, 2020a, Jandrić and Hayes, 2020b). A range of technologies and applications are being used for a range of functions. In addition to looking up the various Key Stage benchmarks. Search histories are wide and varied, ranging from myths around coronavirus, Camus' *The Plague*, and 10 minute workouts, to starting to grow your veg, and what is zoonotic transmission?. Whatsapp is popular for the family group chat, neighbourhood connections and support, with video calls for select individuals. Discord is capable of hosting large group chats and has proved to be a reliable voice call mechanism during online gaming.

Zoom and its 'virtual background' feature has proved to be a big hit for work, social catch-ups and virtual coffee mornings

As no phone number is required, Instagram has become a vital resource for chatting with old and new friends. Netiquette for virtual meetings have been developed, shared and tested. Online team meetings have been interrupted with the dramas of home life and the melodrama of team meetings enhanced by glimpses of home life. Attempts have been made to bake. Games have been invented, rules disputed and issues resolved. When the opportunity arises, we walk, we worry, we talk, we laugh and we cry, both together and online.

While highlighting the value of education and teaching, the COVID-19 crisis has also created conditions for rediscovering and extending informal learning or learning through play, enquiry-based learning, and problem-based learning. Learning curves have been steep and ongoing. Already it is apparent that this crisis has not only opened up debates on how best to respond to the coronavirus, but also whether we should be looking to return to normal or attempt to establish a new normal. Put simply, will the shock that COVID-19 has given to the system prove to be a window of restoration, reform or revolution in our understanding and use of learning and technology?

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# What now?

Michael Jopling and Matthew Johnson



At the end of the 2019 report, we wrote that its objective was to use data and research to inform stakeholders and interested parties in and around the Black Country about key education issues, and to use it to consider afresh the issues and challenges they face. We also identified four interdependent themes which we felt should be examined further: the interplay of collaboration and competition; valuing the local; realising and reconsidering aspiration; and transitions.

Although COVID-19 has transformed how (and whether) most of us work, learn and teach and has reset our priorities, these themes remain relevant issues for consideration as we all grapple with the challenges of moving out of lockdown. However, they have also been transformed. In terms of collaboration and cooperation, the pandemic has uncovered often concealed depths of collaboration at community level as local groups have organised themselves to shop for, and monitor the health and wellbeing of, vulnerable members of their community. Care and health workers have been valued to an unprecedented degree and schools have become providers of care, as well as learning, for children of key workers and vulnerable families. In 2019 we also wrote of the need to redesign local support and services in the Black Country in recognition of their context and this is even more important if the potentially negative effects of the economic crisis associated with COVID-19 are to be minimised. While key issues such as school exclusion or crime have been less urgent during a period when most students have been necessarily excluded from school and distancing has reduced criminal behaviour, developing local approaches to supporting areas of high disadvantage (Kerr et al, 2014) to find ways to re-engage its children, young people and adults in education and employment will surely be key.

Many of the professionals whose voices are heard in this report expressed concern about the effects of the pandemic on the mental health of children, young people and adults. Last year we wrote of the fragile confidence and lack of support that prevents many young people in the Black Country from realising their educational and professional aspirations (Zipin et al, 2013). As discontinuities in education are more common and have a greater effect among disadvantaged children and young people, the sections examining primary and secondary schools suggest that resources and support will have to be targeted towards these groups to ensure they are not further disadvantaged by the pandemic. This report has also underlined the enduring effects of the digital divide, which prevents many disadvantaged children and young people from engaging in online learning and activity. This is also likely to exacerbate the aspiration divide, which restricts the choices of so many children and young people.

We also have the opportunity to re-engineer our final theme of transitions, which we described as a “persistent problem” in 2019. Transition arrangements between pre-school and school, primary and secondary, into FE, HE, employment and beyond have been dismantled by COVID-19. Examinations have been cancelled and new methods are having to be developed to move children and young people between educational phases. While attention is currently focused on how to effect such transitions and offer at least some elements of face to face education from September 2020, the effects of the pandemic also offer us an opportunity to rethink key issues such as how such transitions are achieved, how we can support children, young people and adults over a longer period (rather than immediately before and immediately after a transition), and the importance of our emphasis on high stakes examinations and testing. The section on post-digital futures addresses many of the issues that we face and the importance of continuing to increase skills and qualifications in the Black Country to enable residents to meet these challenges. In effect, the greatest challenge is the transition into a post-digital, post-pandemic and post-lockdown future, which currently remains uncertain. This report is a snapshot of a region itself in a state of transition and we welcome feedback, comment and correction on any aspects of it. As in 2019 we intended to create opportunities online for dialogue between practice, policy and research on the issues we have explored to focus on what it means to attempt to reconnect communities in the Black Country in learning, teaching and education more widely. Please contact us at [educationobservatory@wlv.ac.uk](mailto:educationobservatory@wlv.ac.uk) or [www.educationobservatory.wlv.ac.uk](http://www.educationobservatory.wlv.ac.uk) to get involved.

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# Education Observatory research 2019-20

## **EU digital learning: Co-created interactive courseware (CIC)**

We are working with the EdTech Hub to undertake research which will help governments around the world combat the educational challenges produced by the current Covid-19 pandemic.

## **DfID**

We are also working with the EdTech Hub, to undertake the research and drafting for two reports which will help governments around the world to combat the educational challenges produced by the current pandemic. The EdTech Hub is a global initiative supported by UK government's Department for International Development (DfID), World Bank and Gates Foundation. The first report will explore how the digital learning projects and pilots of the last two decades in the Global South, especially in low-resource and crisis or conflict situations, can help maintain the continuity of education systems worldwide which are now under stress and, more importantly, how these can help combat the potential increase in educational inequality caused by the pandemic.

## **Against the odds**

The purpose of the study is to produce a comprehensive and accurate picture of the Progress 8 gap between disadvantaged students and their peers in English secondary state schools for the Social Mobility Commission. It investigates the characteristics of schools that have successfully reduced and reversed the gap and use its findings to create effective practitioner toolkits to improve outcomes for disadvantaged students in different school settings. Against the Odds has three elements:

- *Analysis of a large body of existing quantitative data and the results of a nationwide survey into schools policies and approaches*
- *Case study work in 30 secondary schools*
- *Production and dissemination of the findings and toolkit for schools.*

The study commenced in June 2019 and concludes in July 2020.

## **HeadStart**

HeadStart aims to improve the ability of children/young people aged 10-14 to cope with the challenges they face in order to prevent them developing common mental health problems. Our role on the project is to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of school and community-based programmes using a variety of methods including large scale surveys of children in schools, interviews with adults and research and films co-produced with young people in Wolverhampton.

## **TALK Derby**

TALK Derby is a programme of support to strengthen the development of speech, language and communication skills in the early years in Derby. Its overall aim is to increase the social mobility of children in some of the most disadvantaged areas of Derby. Our evaluation is concerned with determining the effectiveness and impact of the programme and its constituent projects. It is made up of three overlapping phases: baselining and relationship-building, process evaluation, and impact evaluation, and combines survey work and case studies of practice. The research began in April 2019 and due to COVID-19 is likely now to conclude in 2021.

## Early years SEND

The EYSEND partnership aims to improve the quality of provision for children with SEND in the early years and settings by improving confidence, knowledge and ability in the workforce to identify and support children with SEND. It also seeks to develop effective Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) pathways and improve take-up of the early years offer, increase access and inclusion and support local authorities and partners to develop improved multi-agency strategies. The work is taking place across five regions selected on the basis of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile and take-up of the universal childcare offer (15 hours) for children with SEND in the early years. Our research evaluation was undertaken between April 2019 and March 2020 as a mixed methods study focusing on the impact of the programme in local areas.

## Early years outcomes

We were commissioned in August 2019 to evaluate the Black Country Early Outcomes project outputs. The project has been focused on addressing weaknesses around speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) and raise standards and outcomes in all four Black Country local authorities.

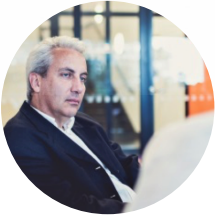
## West Midlands Violence Reduction Unit

The Education Observatory is supporting the evaluation of the West Midlands Violence Reduction Unit (WM VRU). The WM VRU was launched in November 2019 as an alliance of organisations in the West Midlands that share the priority of 'reducing violence'. Led by the WM Police and Crime Commissioner, the VRU was launched with an initial £4m funding from the Home Office.

The evaluation is being delivered in partnership with the Institute of Community Research and Development (ICRD), Birmingham Voluntary Service Council and the University of Birmingham. The evaluation will: allow the VRU to understand the impact of their work on addressing the causes of violence across the region; help the VRU continue to develop their approach through evidence-based commissioning and practice; and will provide new understanding and knowledge that can be shared nationally and internationally.



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